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Rising from the Flames: How Researching Burnout Impacted Two Academic Librarians

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PEER REVIEWED

Rising from the Flames: How Researching Burnout Impacted Two Academic Librarians

By Robert Griggs-Taylor and Jessica Lee

The Georgia Library Quarterly (GLQ) is proud to present this paper, which was the winner of the 2022 Georgia Library Association Academic Library Division academic paper competition. As part of the contest, this paper underwent peer critique and judging rather than the GLQ's peer review process.

Prior to the pandemic, the boundary lines between work and home were often blurred. One author, who is tenured, often found themselves fielding emails and phone calls during events that usually called for rest and respite from work—on their honeymoon, on the evening before Thanksgiving, on maternity leave and while breastfeeding their daughter, and on vacation hoping that the internet connection would be strong enough to resolve an issue.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the lines blurred even more while working from home. While the author was writing a book chapter on occupational burnout in library workers who parent, they were also interrupted regularly during Collaborate meetings. Questions arose such as: “What are the boundaries when an issue needs to be resolved?” and “How can I be the best supervisor and employee if I’m not constantly in contact due to the ‘as-needed’ nature of my position?” The author recognized that a “return to normal” meant something would have to give because this lifestyle was not sustainable.

The boundaries between work and home used to be kept rigidly separate by the other author, who is tenure-track but has yet to attain tenure. A long-time local, the separation between the untenured author’s home and work life began to bleed into and beyond each other as the author progressed through college and worked

in the university library. The feeling of increasing successes at work and school buoyed and sustained the author through otherwise difficult times, making it easier to ignore the cracking boundaries.

These small reprieves from the continual chaos of their life gave the author the sense that they had found their rhythm in life. Perhaps they could even plan a future rather than just eternally survive the present. However, as the author experienced life, they, through both necessity and interest, actively relaxed more of the boundaries built between the spheres of their life. Just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the author accepted a demanding tenure-track faculty position.

The pandemic, combined with other notable and heartrending national and international events, shattered any surviving boundaries the author hoped to keep between work, life, home, and school, and left the author reeling in an endless unavoidable feeling of interconnectedness and helplessness. Instead of being troubled by this, they took comfort in the daily opportunities to meaningfully connect with others.

Introduction

“Burnout” remains a buzzword as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact daily life. In 2021, four librarians from Valdosta State

University (VSU) co-wrote a book chapter by gathering survey data from academic library workers who parent to determine their level of occupational burnout and gauge their perceptions of the relationship between parenting and burnout. The four librarians distributed the survey to national listservs resulting in 684 complete responses and 253 incomplete responses (Holt et al., in press). The survey asked participants to answer three initial qualifying questions to establish them as a parent or caregiver, as employed in an academic library, and as someone who self-identified as having experienced or is experiencing burnout. Any participant who failed to answer yes to the first two questions exited the survey. Participants then self-selected into one of two groups: those who have experienced burnout and those who have not. Both groups answered three similar sets of questions to help the authors gauge how academic library workers who are also parents experience occupational burnout and parental burnout and how they perceive the two forms of burnout interacting with each other.

All participants were asked a standard set of demographic questions regarding their age, income level, job duties and title, gender expression, marital status, etc. For those who indicated that they experienced burnout, the survey asked for a description of symptoms, questions regarding parental burnout, presence or lack of institutional support systems, and the effect of the presence or lack of institutional support symptoms on their symptoms of burnout. The survey contained many opportunities for participants to leave qualitative comments, and they most certainly took the opportunity.

Two of the librarian co-authors left VSU, first one in 2021 and the other in 2022. The two authors who now remain at VSU both work in the Collection and Resource Services department as faculty librarians and managers. A departmental restructuring event occurring shortly after the close of the survey caused the

two librarians to begin actively adjusting their management styles using the insight they gained. The qualitative survey comments from fellow burned-out academic library workers validated the authors' emotions, resulting in a sense of community in what the world was experiencing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the survey comments served as discussion points for improving their individual management styles.

The collective loss of human resources in a building impacts many of the factors leading to burnout. Since 2011, VSU has lost six faculty and nine staff jobs. 2020 brought another loss for the Collection and Resource Services department, where both authors work. A full-time staff member retired, and those duties were subsequently divided among the remaining faculty and staff. Departmental restructuring and budget cuts remain the top reasons for the loss of positions. One survey respondent echoed a statement familiar to all authors of the book chapter: "Job loses [sic] on campus also make a 'skeleton crew' where a person feels bad for taking needed time because they make fellow employees that are already doing multiple jobs do theirs as well..." (Holt et al., in press.). Further, the authors grappled with, and continue to struggle against, the same issues and frustrations that so many respondents expressed in the open-ended survey responses.

Literature Review

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2019) defines burnout as a workplace syndrome stemming from chronic stress that is not successfully managed. The primary three characteristics of burnout are feeling exhausted, negative feelings about your job, and reduced job effectiveness (WHO, 2019). The literature revealed many articles stressing self-care as the answer to relieving and preventing burnout (Arar & Öneren, 2021; Kendrick, 2017; Gewin, 2021; Bartlett, M. J., Arslan, F. N., Bankston, A., & Sarabipour, S.,

2021); however, many articles also pointed to an additional necessity for institutions to begin addressing burnout (Weyant, Wallace, & Woodward, 2021; Townsend & Bugg, 2020; Gewin, 2021).

Weyant et al. (2021a) found that individual supervisors and their relationships with their employees either positively or negatively impacted employee morale. The authors (2021) go on to state, “some articles have indicated that bullying, microaggressions, and burnout can be issues negatively impacting the culture of libraries. These concerns may be under-reported and may point to conflict within libraries as a source of stress and drain on morale for employees” (p. 859). These factors ultimately cause workers to flee toxic work environments.

Some library workers use their sense of dedication to the profession to push through difficult times. In turn, that oft-praised sustained dedication to an institution acts as the force that burns out a library worker. Dedication, where it crosses the line to vocational awe, pushes individuals to burnout and often leaves the library worker open to exploitation from toxic leadership (Kendrick, 2017; Ettarh, 2018). Ettarh (2018) defines vocational awe as “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (para. 3).

Ettarh continues, arguing that placing librarianship so high on the pedestal and the servant-librarian so far below results in a false image of libraries and librarianship. Vocational awe creates a large blind spot by setting “up an expectation that any failure of libraries is largely the fault of individuals failing to live up to the ideals of the profession, rather than understanding that the library as an institution is fundamentally flawed” (Ettarh, 2018, para 14). Individuals who feel very dedicated to a job

or profession may not necessarily suffer from vocational awe but should monitor themselves for their own boundaries versus the needs of the institution.

Librarians on the tenure track feel the pinch when trying to fulfill all the obligations required to earn tenure. Completing scholarship and service on top of regular job duties requires academic librarians to routinely work more than the standard and expected 40-hour work week. Bartlett, et al. (2021) reveals that academia often favors productivity over personal well-being and “academics report less time for research” as a result of other increasing responsibilities (p. 1). Kendrick’s (2017) phenomenological study on the experience of low morale in academic librarians found “ineffective communicators” to be the most common reason for low morale and that a focus on self-care activities and a healthier work-life balance helped alleviate low morale (p. 858).

Many standard self-care activities typically listed, such as exercise, medication, and spending time with family, should be encouraged in individuals, but these solutions do not tackle institutional issues on a larger scale. Kendrick (2017) continues by pointing out that making “conscious efforts to re-prioritize their work” made an impact on an individual attempting to attain a better work-life balance and lessen the effects of burnout and low morale (p. 864).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided new avenues for relieving burnout and low morale. Mayer, Wegerle, and Oosthuizen (2021) found providing employees with virtual work opportunities fosters a better work-life balance for employees and creates more productive employees who “feel more motivated” (p. 2). They also found that supervisors should cultivate a culture of resilience for managers and employees to successfully maintain healthy “mental and bodily health and well-being” (Mayer et al., 2021, p. 2). The relationship between staff and faculty can be a delicate

balance to navigate as expectations differ for both parties.

As managers, we should focus on “measuring and attending to employee’s day-to-day emotional states and well-being and improvements in employee health” (Mayer, et al., 2021, p. 2) by learning to accept that there will be bumps in the road, practicing positive reinforcement, and owning up to mistakes. In most cases, being attuned to an employee’s “emotional states” can be challenging or unrealistic, especially if you are managing several employees. Balancing your own mental wellness and your employee’s mental wellness can feel like a circus act; can you juggle and walk the tightrope without falling? Although being keyed into an employee’s needs may be difficult to get right all the time, that is not an excuse for phoning it in and not being an active participant in their work lives.

Reflections and Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic found many suddenly at home all the time. While some thrived in the work from home environment, others suffered through it. As we “returned to normal” and went back on campus full time, the authors saw a need to continue allowing employees to work from home and provide more flexibility in their work schedule. Employees recovering from illnesses or drastic life changes continued to work through their recovery periods at home and eagerly picked up tasks that needed completion. The additional flexibility gave our employees the ability to rest while working at home as they chose. Remote work also helped alleviate the common stressor of commuting, allowing an employee to stretch out their eight-hour workday and have more personal time before and after work.

During the pandemic shutdown, VSU followed the lead of others in higher education and quickly pivoted to an online teaching and work environment. Long after the requirement to return to campus, the institution began drafting

an official telework policy. Once the university enacts the policy, hopefully in spring 2023, the authors intend to encourage all library workers that they supervise to apply for the ability to telework if they feel it would be beneficial to their life. Employees desire remote work for a variety of reasons. Some employees commented on how useful it would be to have at least one day a week that could be completed at home as a method to help ease the rushed feeling. Others may use the time to allow them to ease into the workday and thus sustain a better focus throughout the day.

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly exacerbated the current problem with burnout, but the problem is not a new one. For tenure track faculty members, the expectations of responsibilities are high. In order to achieve tenure and promotion (and to simply keep our jobs), we must publish peer-reviewed research, present at conferences, serve actively (ideally in a leadership role) on committees, and more in addition to our normal librarian job duties. Academia inherently carries these stressors.

Desiree Dickerson, a mental health professional, pointed out that “burnout is a problem inherent in the academic system: because of how narrowly it defines excellence, and how it categorizes and rewards success” (Gewin, 2021, para 17). These external expectations of excellence can wreak havoc on one’s mental health when the allotted amount of time to fulfill the requirements of tenure and promotion actively ticks down. Additional responsibilities, such as supervising, only add to the mental load.

The expectation for faculty librarians at Odum Library is to spend 70% of the work week on defined job responsibilities, 15% on service, 10% on research, and 5% on professional development. These expectations are not set in stone, and there are times when one area (for example, research) may need to swallow the time of another (for example, service) depending on the need. It can feel daunting to

complete research projects within only 10% of your devoted work week.

Depending on the chosen topic, one could easily spend 40 hours of a work week completing a research project, especially if it involves survey data (which will also require IRB approval), reading and writing a literature review, analyzing data, and writing the results. It is an extremely time-consuming project that often leaves librarians with no choice but to pursue research pursuits after hours and on the weekends.

The tenured author was the first person in a technical services position to submit a dossier for tenure until the new Promotion and Tenure policy was implemented in 2018. They found themselves fretting over their dossier at nine months pregnant and submitting the document almost immediately upon returning from maternity leave. Because of this, the author found themselves overcompensating and over explaining what their job was and how it tied into student success, since much of the work may result in little to no contact with students. Working towards tenure while supervising and completing regular job duties often feels like being Pepa Madrigal from the Disney movie *Encanto* (Howard et al., 2021), whose magical gift is that her emotions control the weather.

As someone who constantly looks towards preparing for the future, this author also worked towards a second master's degree in public administration before and after receiving tenure, as the new promotion and tenure policy required a second master's degree or doctorate to achieve full professor status at VSU. This author had no desire to pursue a second degree but did it purely for promotional reasons. At times, juggling the workload of it all can feel like a raincloud is constantly dumping water on your head.

This author was relieved to find that Odum Library did not house the mentality of "you must suffer since I suffered through tenure,"

however, there is not a formal mentorship program. Thankfully there are librarians who are willing to have you hitch your car to their wagon and figure out your research interests and the best way to accomplish the extensive list for tenure.

Imposter syndrome can also be exacerbated in academic libraries that are tenure-track; faculty, when interacting with other library faculty, are surprised and baffled that librarians are given the same status as teaching faculty. This can also be compounded by the type of Master of Library Science program one attends if a thesis or capstone is not required. There are some new faculty who may not have written articles for publication or presented in a professional setting before. These tensions can sow thoughts of self-doubt and the inability to say no when juggling new tasks.

Another response from our survey on library workers who are experiencing burnout as parents noted the importance of an active supervisor, stating that "checking in with an understanding supervisor is important" (Holt et al., in press). The responses from the survey instilled a sense of urgency for open and honest communication between an employee and their employer as a method of establishing positive relationships for both the supervisor and the supervisee. Both authors possessed limited supervisory experience prior to taking their current jobs and found themselves treading a steep learning curve together. Both authors admit to a mostly hands-off management style which may originate from the sense that an employee knows their job better than their supervisor. Old habits of communication do not always provide information in a manner useful for staff to contextualize and manage their priorities as the fiscal year progressed and workflows and job duties changed, sometimes drastically.

The tenured author, after experiencing extreme burnout caused and sustained by the pandemic, tried to make additional time for self-care. By

the middle of 2021, several self-care strategies included ignoring emails after hours and following through with previously avoided doctor appointments. At one point, several appointments within a week's time kept them physically out of the office. They recognized that to prioritize their own self-care, they needed to manage their own guilt from spending so many hours out of the office and recognize that self-care also involved using paid sick leave without guilt.

Resting does not always come easy to some individuals, particularly near the end of a project when they may tend to work through lunch just to finish the project. When analyzing where the guilt for resting comes from, it can stem from imposter syndrome and wanting to prove to yourself that you are worthy of this position. The tenure-track author managed their self-care with medication, therapy (including the act of open advocacy for appropriately managed medication and therapy), and active community building efforts for validation and support.

For a variety of reasons, the author can no longer and no longer desires to maintain a separate work-life mentality. Instead, they work to establish work-life boundaries tailored to their current needs. The tactic of using personal leave time for mental health days in addition to using leave to take care of parental responsibilities has resulted in financial uncertainty every year. Library workers must have a significant amount of built-up leave to pay themselves over the winter holidays. Additionally, the timing of the burnout survey project coincided with another project on the author's plate. Both projects involved a heavy amount of emotional and mental energy, requiring the author to manage the emotions resulting from the projects in addition to a close personal loss and other struggles.

Both authors are the only faculty members in Odum Library who have children under the age of 18. One author has a child in preschool while

the other has two teenagers in high school. Maintaining a standard image of work-life balance increases in difficulty when adding the responsibilities of parenting. Another response in the survey project stated: "It is important to have discussions with my colleagues, not just those with children, but those with like minds or in similar roles at my institution. We are able to adjust our workloads to help each other balance work-life matters" (Holt et al., in press). The authors find themselves frequently giving each other pep talks focusing on successful supervising strategies, ways to manage workloads, activities to support tenure, and parenting tips. Commonly, these work responsibilities clash with children's activities and, thankfully, both authors have active parenting partners who help alleviate the pressures of being "on call" for a child's needs throughout the workday. Yet even with support, both authors still find themselves rushing to forgotten appointments or picking up sick kids because their partners do not have as flexible of schedules. Both authors often feel like they constantly have one foot out the door in case a familial need arises and have found themselves advocating for their parental needs more often than before.

One benefit of the pandemic has been the increasing awareness of the struggles of working parents, particularly working mothers, even if no change has occurred yet. Both authors tended to rely on the "mom brain" excuse to explain moments when they dropped the ball or forgot to follow up on a task. According to Eve Rodsky, the "cognitive labor of running a household is as intense as running a Fortune 500 company" (Bogen, 2022). Rodsky and her team conducted interviews with 200 moms and found that they managed over half of the "conception and planning" of what was needed to run their household on top of having a paying job. Every single interviewee had some kind of physical reaction to the stress which included the inability to sleep and other issues (Bogen, 2022).

Even with the spotlight on burnout and the stress on working mothers, there has yet to be a real reckoning on what that can do to an employee over time. A *New York Times* article focused on working mothers quoted a mother who shared her experience with the expectation to return to normal. Rebecca Bird Grigsby, when interviewed for the article, said that with her kids back to in-person school full time she should be able to “work at full capacity, I can focus on professional development, the kids will be fine,” but she continued to say that she does not truly feel that to be the case (Miller, 2022).

Both authors experienced the same pressure and anxieties regarding their children upon returning to work. One author’s child spent 18 months out of school during the pandemic and returned in fall 2021. The other author often retreated in and out of an old, very strict, day-by-day coping mechanism to balance the mental and emotional stressors. Finding the balance between being a good parent and a good employee feels even more like a tightrope walk than before the pandemic.

The authors often experienced the pressure to put efficiency over all else. These pressures do not always originate from the institution but could also be a general sense from broader society or a result of internal stress in addition to institutional expectations. Regardless, a similar drive towards the greatest efficiency continues to slowly creep into academia. In library technical services, efficiency may not be as crucial as correctness and attention to detail.

To foster productive and happy work environments, supervisors must openly communicate about their expectations, especially regarding project priorities. The authors used an increasing number of strategies to foster open communication around the office. Some of the strategies include encouraging staff to use leave, having semi-regular meetings, and providing opportunities for staff to give feedback or voice opinions on workloads and procedures. Many of these

strategies hinged on the ability to push past personal anxieties to accomplish a goal.

As more libraries move away from systems and programs that must be downloaded to a single physical station, more avenues for remote work have opened for employees, and the authors strongly believe the option should continue to be made available. Cloud based systems like Ex Libris Alma or OCLC WorldShare Management Services provide employees the ability to successfully work from home by accessing the same systems as they do in their office. We recognize that those who do not work in patron-facing positions can be given more flexibility than those who do, but that should not eliminate the possibility of patron-facing departments offering opportunities for remote work. Our department allows a little more flexibility because we do not have desk shifts that need coverage.

Proactive communication to staff on the use of leave and self-care during recovery has become an essential part of supervising. Anxiety sometimes surrounds the act of taking time off for any reason, pleasure or illness, and employees expressed concerns regarding how job responsibilities will be handled by another. The authors spent a lot of time consulting, discussing, and strategizing their management approaches together to smooth workflows and provide reassurance and information to employees. The authors additionally, increasingly, and openly acknowledged the importance of employees' mental wellbeing and health by recognizing opportunities to speak up and comfort a staff member going through life's challenges. By being present and attentive, the hope is that employees will feel heard, understood, and comfortable bringing up future issues.

In the Weyant et al. (2021b) article, which focused on suggestions for improving morale in libraries, the authors identified research stating supervisors should meet regularly with their staff, comment on positive achievements, and

provide feedback for improvement as methods to positively affect morale. Weyant et al. (2021b) continued, noting that these tactics allow employees to “feel seen, voice concerns, and achieve” (p.1001). Another strategy for success came from realizing that “normal” and the nature of work and life have permanently changed since March 2020.

The authors now take a more encouraging stance with staff than previously. The encouragement includes strong advocacy for staff’s ability to actively pursue related avenues of interest during their workday, such as participating in campus committees, attending virtual professional development webinars and conferences, and other opportunities. The authors hope to continue to see these activities, combined with freely given encouragement, result in a more empowered staff confident in making suggestions to workflows and procedures that impact their workload. As supervisors, the authors rely on their staff to know their job responsibilities and in turn approach changes in workflows with understanding. While the two authors have a shared experience of parenting on top of a tenure track position, they recognize that everyone (parent or not) has commitments to family or their own personal needs, and this should not be overshadowed by work.

At some point during the reflection process, the authors realized that they often sought to model effective behaviors in the face of a lack of models to draw from in their day-to-day lives. Some effective personal strategies for maintaining purpose included keeping actions consistent with ultimate goals and inner ethics. Additionally, finding release-valve situations for venting and validation and identifying small, anxiety-disrupting actions can help manage anxiety spikes concerning boundaries and work. The authors found these practices helpful in openly encouraging colleagues to take their earned leave without any presumption of an excuse.

The pressure to fully justify and explain the reasons for an absence creates a barrier to using leave. These tactics can be as simple as stopping a person for an opportunity to think about how much they need to share during an emergency. There have been occasions when one of the authors or an employee have felt the anxiety-ridden draw to over-explain a crisis that is happening as a justification of why unexpected leave is needed. The authors exhort readers to take their earned leave time. They should share their reasons for using earned leave time as much or little as needed and wanted. They should take momentary opportunities to create spaces of awareness and act in ways that encourage a culture of flexibility. Part of that flexible response as a supervisor involves openly acknowledging and making space for those who process information differently. Institutions and employers play a crucial role in promoting a culture of healthy work-life balances and removing institutional barriers to healthy work-life balances among employees.

Conclusion

As both authors navigate managing employees, their own boundaries, and ever-changing job roles, they also work to keep a flexible mindset. The authors plan to continue to refine communication plans and job responsibilities as time moves forward. The authors intend to reflect again after several years to trace the effect of their changes. However, burnout and low morale continue to be an issue that institutions need to face now. To prevent a continuation of the “Great Resignation,” there needs to be a drastic change in how employers interact with employees and frame their expectations.

As the authors are on different timelines in terms of their careers, the authors believe that mentorship is an area of importance when reflecting on burnout and low morale. Mentorship can be a crucial component of a faculty member’s success in a tenure-track

position. While this article covered a wide range of topics, from work-life balance and the stresses of parenthood to personal strategies for self-care, most importantly, the authors want people to know that library workers are human too and are burning out.

Next Steps

Moving forward, the authors plan to use this reflection as a jumping off point to poll staff on what their needs are and where managers fall short. This process will be constantly evolving because someone's needs now may not be what they need in six months or in six years. Self-care and setting boundaries can only mitigate burnout to a point; there needs to be institutional change to make an impact on employees on a larger scale.

As managers, we need to be continuously modeling good self-care and finding ways to articulate that to staff. Additionally, the literature reveals a multitude of institutional support strategies to combat burnout and better prepare our employees for success. However, those that preach the sanctity of either firm work-life balances or "cultures of resilience" risk losing the ability to balance according to local conditions. The lines between the different spheres of responsibility in life may become blurred as individuals move through the different circumstances of life, but we must acknowledge that multiple living realities exist. Racial and social justice problems exist in our buildings, and not everyone can or should be expected to toe a specific invisible line at work. People should not be burning themselves out for a lie.

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